

## June 8, 2009 - Little Airports Rely On Political Clout To Stay Aloft

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### Little Airports Rely On Political Clout To Stay Aloft

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June 8, 2009

House Republicans recently sought to block funding for the airport in the Pennsylvania hometown of Rep. John P. Murtha, complaining that the powerful Democrat has showered the modern but lightly used facility with wasted taxpayer dollars.

But the Murtha airport is one of many small-town airports — in districts represented by members from both parties — that have been heavily subsidized through federal grant programs, earmarks and the economic stimulus plan (PL 111-5).

A major funding source for Murtha's hometown airport is the Essential Air Service program, created by Congress to help small airports survive after the 1978 airline deregulation. More than 150 airports qualify for the assistance — many of them at a higher per-passenger subsidy, and with lower passenger loads, than the airport named for Murtha in Johnstown, Pa.

In fiscal 2008 the Murtha airport secured \$1.3 million in

flight subsidies, according to Department of Transportation data.

Among the 69 small airports in the contiguous 48 states and Puerto Rico that received program funding, the airport ranked 40th in per passenger subsidies, receiving just over \$100 for each of the 13,829 passengers that used the facility.

Bob Poole, a transportation policy expert at the libertarian Reason Foundation, said the program was initially supposed to expire after 10 years but has stayed alive through bipartisan support from lawmakers, particularly those from rural areas.

“Johnstown is not the most egregious by any means,” Poole said.

Controversy over the Murtha airport flared during a pre-Memorial Day House debate on a bill (HR 915) to reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration.

John Campbell, R-Calif., offered an amendment to deny subsidies to the Johnstown airport, arguing that the facility had benefited from more than \$150 million in federal funding since fiscal 1990 from the Essential Air Service program, earmarks and economic stimulus money.

He criticized using taxpayer money to upgrade an airport whose flights consist of three round-trip flights on weekdays — and an even lighter schedule on weekends — to Dulles International Airport outside of Washington, which is a three-hour drive from Johnstown.

“We all know about the ‘Bridge to Nowhere,’” said Campbell, referring to an Alaska project that to critics symbolized federal waste. “And this surely is the airport for no one.”

The House defeated the amendment, 263-154, after Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman James L. Oberstar, D-Minn., warned that the measure could backfire on Republicans whose districts get air subsidies.

“To those on the other side, Mr. Speaker, who are laughing now, I wonder what their reaction will be when another amendment comes to deny funding for essential air service to an airport in their communities. They won’t be laughing,” Oberstar said.

Under the Essential Air Service program, subsidies are capped at \$200 per passenger unless the facility is more than 210 miles driving distance from a medium or large airport hub. However, a number of airports subject to the \$200 cap are being allowed to exceed it as they try to increase their passenger loads. They risk losing the subsidies if they continue to exceed the cap.

#### In Alaska, 43 Airports Get Aid

In addition to airports in the lower 48 states and Puerto Rico, the program underwrites flights at 43 airports in Alaska, the most of any state. The Department of Transportation does not provide per passenger subsidy figures for the Alaska facilities, but all exceed the 210-mile standard.

Outside of Alaska, the most heavily subsidized air service per passenger last year was at the Alamogordo White Sands Regional Airport in New Mexico. The facility, which offers flights to Albuquerque, received \$1,812 for each of its 549 passengers.

The Alamogordo is in the district of Democrat Harry Teague, who is in his first year in Congress. The district previously was held by Republican Steve Pearce, who gave up the seat to run unsuccessfully for the Senate.

The second-highest subsidy was the Decatur Airport in Illinois, whose flights to St. Louis were underwritten at a cost of \$610 per passenger. The facility served 2,214 passengers. It is in the district of Republican Timothy V. Johnson.

The Bush administration repeatedly tried to stop funding the Essential Air Service, but was rebuffed by Congress.

The Johnstown airport, which is 84 miles driving distance from Pittsburgh International Airport, is closer to a major hub than most of the program's airports. But a handful of other facilities in the program are even closer.

For example, the airport in Lebanon, N.H., is 72 miles from the nearest medium-size airport in Manchester, while the airport in Macon, Ga., is 82 miles from Atlanta.

While a large majority of Republicans voted to deny funding to the Murtha airport, 28 GOP lawmakers, including a dozen Appropriations Committee members, sided with Democrats.

One of those Republican appropriators, Hal Rogers, has steered funds to a small airport in his hometown of Somerset, Ky. In 2004, the Lake Cumberland Regional Airport got a \$3 million FAA airport improvement grant for a new terminal. But the airport sat empty for three years until officials could find a carrier to make the 45-minute trip to Nashville. The airport does not receive Essential Air Service subsidies.

Rogers told McClatchy News Service last month that he supported the airport funding to spur economic development and tourism.

Another GOP lawmaker who voted with the Democrats on the Murtha airport was Don Young of Alaska, a sponsor of the Bridge to Nowhere earmark. His airplane-dependent state got \$10 million last year under the Essential Air Service program.

Other Republicans with small airports in their districts voted to kill funding to the Murtha airport, including Adrian Smith, whose western Nebraska district has seven small airports that have received millions of dollars in carrier subsidies.

In a news release, Smith said he voted against the FAA reauthorization bill because it included costly mandates for small airports. But the lawmaker said he supported increased funding for the Essential Air Service program because "these airports are integral to the economies of our small communities."

Republicans say the Murtha airport has benefited from more than the Essential Air Service program, including \$800,000 for runway rehabilitation that was tucked into the economic stimulus package. That legislation provided \$1 billion for dozens of airports around the country, including a number of smaller facilities.

As an Appropriations subcommittee chairman, Murtha has secured tens of millions of dollars in earmarks for his district, including funds for the Johnstown airport.

Steve Ellis, vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense, said Oberstar's warning to colleagues that their airports could be cut next if they voted to kill the Johnstown facility funding has been a persuasive argument over the years in stifling efforts to trim pork barrel spending.

"Everybody gets along to go along," Ellis said.